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ABSTRACT

Max was one of the boys who went to the St. Kilda Police and Citizens Youth Club every week. He was often in minor scrapes, but nothing serious. When he was 20, he was conscripted into the Australian army and sent to fight in Vietnam, leaving behind his new wife and baby son. Like most of the nearly 50,000 primarily working class Australians in the war, Max knew little about the history or politics of Vietnam. His father, who had fought in World War II, thought it would "make a man of him." Max returned from his tour of duty physically unharmed, but in the words of his aunt "a bundle of nerves." When he discovered his wife was having an affair with his old friend, he took action that had serious consequences. He shot out the windows in his house; his pregnant wife took their son and left; and he was sent to prison for three years. After he was released, he spent years traveling and taking odd jobs. He settled on a job in a service station. Through his ex-wife's sister-in-law, Max was reunited with his son and the daughter he had never seen. Because of a back injury, he decided to take a course at the Technical and Further Education college where he developed a relationship with a fellow student. (This high interest, low vocabulary book's appendixes include a glossary, short history of the Vietnam War, and a timeline.) (YLB)

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MAKE A MAN OF HIM

BY PAM BAKER

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Make a man of him
Pam Baker

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Biographical note:

Pam Baker was born in 1940 and grew up in suburban Melbourne. After graduating from Melbourne University she taught in Victorian high schools and overseas in the U.K. She was one of 70,000 people demonstrating against Australian involvement in the in Vietnam war by occupying the streets of Melbourne, May 1970, in the biggest of all the Australian moratorium marches. Following the birth of her two children she began teaching in adult education, where she continued to work for twenty years, always in Access education. She was involved from the beginning in the development of the Certificates in General Education for Adults. From both her colleagues and her students she has learned much.

Now retired and living by the sea, Pam writes fiction, walks on the beach, and maintains her lifelong passions for reading and cooking.

CHAPTER 1:

A BIT WILD

'I'm leavin' school, Mum,' Max said on his fifteenth birthday. 'Never learn anything there.' His parents did not argue. Max's last school report had not been encouraging. His mark for maths was 20%. ''Struth, lad,' said his father. 'Did you skip every maths lesson?' Max shrugged. He had missed classes, and when he was there he never listened. How could anyone listen to old Nelson Hart?

The maths teacher at South Melbourne Tech wore one sleeve of his navy blue jacket pinned just above the pocket; he had lost an arm during the Second World War. He was a bit deaf too. He covered the blackboard with figures and diagrams and talked mainly to the front row. 'Now boys settle down,' he'd say and peer at the back rows occasionally. Max and his best mate, Ernie, spent a lot of time throwing chalk, pinched at the start of the lesson. They aimed at the heads of boys in the front rows. If they had maths first period, they came at the end of the lesson and climbed in the window. It was risky to be in the corridors where Dog Morris patrolled. Old Nelson never realised they weren't there.

Before Max was sixteen he found a good job as a storeman. It was physically tiring. At the end of the day he had a beer with his Dad at the pub. He was a big lad, fully grown even at fifteen.

The pub was his Dad's local. The publican turned a blind eye. 'No harm in a lad havin' a quiet one with his old man.' Then they went home for tea. As the clock chimed six, his mother, Dot, began to strain the potatoes. The plates were on the table when Max and his father, Bill, came in the door.

After tea Max met his mates. They drifted around the streets and usually finished up at one or other of their houses. Their mothers never knew how many sleeping bodies they would find on the floor in the morning. Up to ten or twelve sometimes. Nobody minded.

But they did mind the police bringing the boys home. The local police knew all the lads, who went to the St Kilda Police and Citizens Youth Club every week. If Sergeant Crawford saw one of them having a sly one at a pub during the weekend he beckoned with his big finger from the door. 'I want to see you,' he said. And when a boy slouched over, the sergeant spun him round and said, 'That's where you live.' And the boy started to walk down the street. The next minute he felt a size ten boot up his backside.

The fighting was more serious, especially at weekends when gangs came from Collingwood or Fitzroy. If the rival gangs were Italian or Greek, the punching and kicking was worse. The police drove the local lads down to the police station and gave them a clip around the ears before they took them home to their mothers. They packed the Collingwood or Fitzroy boys back on the train and told them never to come back.

When anyone asked Elaine how she got involved with Max she always laughed and said it was the hit on the head that woke Max up to her charms, the hit on the head that happened at the big fight after the Collingwood/St Kilda match. She had known Max most of her life. They were St Kilda kids. Max played football with her brother and she was best friends with Max's

baby sister. Of course Elaine went to the hospital with Judy when Max was having his head stitched. She laughed at the shaved patch. 'Does it hurt?'

'Only when I laugh.' And the girls laughed. 'Just another fight,' Max said. He arched back, sticking out his chest. 'Thirty or forty of them there were, all getting stuck into Tone. He's me mate. Pointy toe marks he had, all over his body. I just got into it, laid into those Collingwood wogs. Then I got clobbered with these billiard cues.' He pointed to his head.

Max thought Elaine was probably right. He'd never taken much notice of her before, just Dennis's kid sister. At the hospital he was suddenly all eyes. She was a real good looker. A sexy blonde. While they were waiting for the doctor to say he could go home he decided to ask her out.

He was seventeen and she was sixteen. They went out every week, to the Sound Lounge at the South Pacific or to the flicks at the Astor. He loved John Wayne movies.

Elaine's Mum was not pleased. 'He's a wild one. Police always bringing him home. His poor mother must be a nervous wreck.'

'Oh Mum, it's nothing serious. Just boys fighting.'

'You don't see our Dennis carrying on like that. Gang warfare it is. Shouldn't be allowed.' Elaine shrugged and left the room.

After the incident with the billiard cues, Dot started to nag Bill about moving to the country, where she and Bill had lived as children, to get Max away from all the bad influences. 'You've got your TPI pension now. We don't need to be here for your work. Let's go back to your old town. You know you miss it.' It took her nearly a year to persuade Bill.

When they told Max they were thinking of moving to Corryong, and showed him where it was on the map, he really started to play up. He and his mates nicked cars and went for joy rides, and one night Max was charged with assault.

'The trouble with those damn FJs. All you need is a pair of pliers and a bit of a tickle,' grumbled Bill.

'That's it,' said Dot. 'We're going straight away.'

♦ ❖ ♦

Max didn't hate Corryong, where he got a job with the Forestry Commission. It was seasonal work, chopping down gum trees and clipping all the gumnuts in the timber yard. He played full back for the Corryong football team, and went rabbiting and fox hunting up and down the lower mountain slopes.

But he had to leave Elaine behind in Melbourne. He was always going down to see her. He used to 'borrow' cars and just dump them when he reached Melbourne. If the car was still there when he was returning, he drove it back. He never took cars from the township of Corryong, though once he 'borrowed' his father's.

'You cheeky bugger. If you do that again I'll knock your block off. Good thing for you the car's not damaged.' Bill's face was scarlet.

'You couldn't knock the block off a puff of wind now, you crook old so-and-so,' Max muttered under his breath.

'Come on, Dad, there's no harm done,' said Dot. 'He is settling down since we moved. And you know how keen he is on Elaine.'

CHAPTER 2:
THE LOTTERY

Late in 1966, just after his twentieth birthday, Max received a brown government envelope with the letters OHMS printed in the top left-hand corner. He knew what was inside: a letter saying he'd been called up for National Service. It said he had to go to Melbourne to the induction centre before doing his basic training at Puckapunyal. Bloody stupid he thought, when Melbourne was miles away and Pucka just down the road.

He brought the letter out at tea time and waved it in front of his mother.

'You're not going anywhere,' said Dot, her face crumpling.

'Oh go on,' said Bill. 'It'll make a man of him. I did my bit in World War 2. Now it's his turn. He'll turn out better for being in the army.'

'Like you did, I suppose,' snapped Dot. 'With your crook heart and your crook head.'

Max pushed his chair back. 'I'm going round to see Wayne and Bluey. See if they got letters too.' A few weeks earlier the three Corryong lads had collected their yellow registration forms at the same time from the Post Office. Their birthdays were close together.

Both Max's mates were already at the pub. 'Snap,' said Bluey when Max waved his letter at them.

'Snap,' said Wayne. They all laughed.

'Looks like we're all in trouble,' said Max and they slapped each other on the back, and got stuck into the beer.

♦ ❖ ♦

Dot phoned her sister Beryl. Beryl had a lot to say. 'It's a disgrace I call it. Should be all or nothing. None of this lottery business. You know they draw the marbles out of the Tatts barrel don't you? Nobody minds them doing National service. Do a lot of them good, but I don't know about this Vietnam business.'

'Bill says there's no hope of me objecting. Because of the two older boys. Not to mention the girls.'

Bill strolled down to the pub. 'Me boy's been called up,' he announced to everyone.

'Good on you, boy,' old Jimmy called to Max. 'You don't want communists coming down here, cutting people's heads off and raping your mother and your sisters. You get in there and give them whatfor.'

Max found it hard to go to sleep that night, despite the beer. He wasn't worried about the two years, except for the little bombshell Elaine had just dropped. He wasn't worried about going into camp. He'd always been keen on the army, always playing with plastic soldiers as a kid, just never got around to doing anything about it. But he was worried about going overseas, worried about getting killed, or maybe worse, being crippled, never able to play football with the little tacker.

It was this Vietnam stuff. He'd never heard of Vietnam until a year ago. He knew nothing about it, except that it was in danger of falling to the communists. People said it was like dominoes. The commos'd get one place and then all the other countries would fall. Next thing they'd be landing in Australia. His Dad said it was better to kill a snake outside before it got into the house.

♦ ❖ ♦

Max rummaged around in the girls' room to find Judy's old school atlas; he looked up where Vietnam was. Must be hot there, near the equator. He wouldn't mind that. Corryong was a cold hole.

In the morning he phoned the Forestry Commission and said he was sick; he wouldn't be at work. He caught the train to Melbourne. He had to talk to Elaine.

When he told Dot that he and Elaine were thinking of getting married she asked him straight out, 'Having a baby is she?'

Max didn't mind that Elaine was pregnant. It'd be good to have a kid. He'd take him fishing and teach him to play footie; all the things his Dad was too crook to do.

He and Elaine had been knocking around together for nearly three years now. They'd talked about getting engaged. It'd have to be a short engagement now. They decided to get married before he went into the army.

Dot was happy enough about the marriage. She bought a new dress for the wedding. Marriage would steady the boy. He was on the right track now, except for that wretched army. She would pray that Max would not be sent overseas. Max had told her not to worry, only one battalion went overseas every twelve months. Only eight hundred in a battalion, and not all of them were nashos. 'They call up thousands, Mum.'

CHAPTER 3:

IN THE ARMY

At 8 a.m. one morning Max and Elaine, Dot and Bill, stood outside the induction centre in Richmond.

Dot gaped at the crowds. There were dozens of police and hundreds of protesters, many of them women. They shouted at the police, and at the new recruits; they waved placards - *Stop the War Now*, *End Conscription*, and *No Aussie blood for Vietnam*; and some of them tried to prevent the draftees from going through the gates. The police pulled them away from the bewildered young men with their suitcases.

'Mum'll be joining that,' Max said, jerking his shoulder towards the *Save Our Sons* sign.

'No. She's not ugly enough.' Bill laughed, and glared at the protesting women. Then he said, 'Come on, love, give 'em a few minutes by themselves,' and he tugged at Dot's arm. Dot threw her arms around Max before moving away with Bill.

Max glanced around, then hugged Elaine. 'Have a boy, mind,' he said. He kissed her quickly, removed her arms from around his neck, and walked through the gates; into the army.

The young men were marshalled into alphabetical lots, and processed like sheep through medical, dental, eye and blood tests. There was much waiting around and it was afternoon before they were herded on to the buses for the trip up the

Hume highway to Puckapunyal, where they were to do their three months basic training.

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It was no longer light when the buses disgorged their untidy and weary passengers; they milled around on the bitumen parade ground. 'Right, you bunch of civilian mongrels, line up instead of wandering around like a lot of bloody sheep,' yelled a red-faced sergeant. In seconds the men were in line and marching to 'Lep, right,' first to the mess hall for a hot meal and then to the wooden huts which were to be their barracks.

For the next two days they learned about obeying orders. Max was in 23rd platoon. They were all raw recruits. Their platoon staff ordered them from mess hall to Quartermaster's store, from aid post to linen store, back to their barracks to deposit their latest gear in correct soldierly fashion in their lockers and trucks, then off again for more equipment and more filling out of forms.

Everyone felt that to the military machine each man was a just number. They laughed about their nasho numbers saying it wasn't a number, it was a memory test. Each was allocated a number that began with his state of induction as a prefix, like 3 for Victoria, followed by the number 7, which meant national service. The logic of the other digits escaped them, but they learnt their numbers quickly.

Max had thought he was fit from playing football and running up and down the hills of Corryong. But he was exhausted like all the others at the end of every day. And nothing pleased their masters. 'You maggots, you never done it properly. You're going to do that again, and again, and again, until I'm satisfied.' Or they had to do twenty push-ups ('Hard at it or you'll keep going until the ground sinks') or five laps with a full pack.

When he spoke to Elaine on the phone she wanted to know what they did all day. 'Just all the basic stuff ... you know ... learning to march ... you do rifle drill, firing drill ... learn how to pull the pin out of a grenade and throw it. You've watched enough movies. Even you'd know what to do.' He laughed. 'You'd be better than me at kitchen duty. You should see the bloody great dixies we have to scrub that can't go in the dishwashers.'

Max was very good on the firing range. His score was better than anyone else's. 'At least you're not completely bloody hopeless,' said his sergeant.

'All those rabbits,' Max said to his mates. He would have occasion later to regret his marksmanship.

♦ ❖ ♦

Elaine couldn't tell what Max thought of the baby. They had to decide the baby's name over the phone. Max wasn't allowed to go to Melbourne for the birth. 'If we gave leave to every no-hoper who got a girl up the spout, we'd never have a full platoon,' said his sergeant. Max didn't see his son until his two weeks leave at the end of his basic training.

When Elaine put the baby in his arms he thought to himself that he wouldn't have gone back if they'd let him out for the baby's birth. But when the child began to cry he said, 'Here, take him.'

Max's orders came. He was to join the 6th Battalion in Tully, Queensland. 'You beauty, you little ripper,' he said, swinging Elaine off the ground. The 6th had only recently come back from Vietnam. He felt he was safe. He didn't know then that a battalion might do several tours of duty in Vietnam.

After he had been at Tully for four weeks, the battalion was given orders to move out to Cannungra, the jungle training

centre near the border with N.S.W. Max looked at Bluey, who had been sent to the same battalion. 'Whacko, this is it!' Bluey said. Why would they be sent to a jungle training centre if they weren't being sent to the jungles of Vietnam? Cannungra was the toughest training of all. It was called a battle efficiency course. The recruits were trained by men who had just come back from Vietnam or had been over with the first battalion.

Max was glad of the old St Kilda pier, which they had jumped off as boys, when they were sent fully clothed from the high tower into the Cannungra river. He was a strong swimmer. Not everyone was.

There were night marches when they didn't know whether they were marching all night or whether they'd camp out, or even whether they'd be fed. It was pitch dark. They couldn't see where they were putting their feet next.

There were lectures until 9.30 at night where they sat with aching bones and muscles, desperate to sleep, listening to experts tell them about mines and booby traps. 'Sounds great,' Bluey muttered.

'Yeah, like a bit of a bang out of life.'

They were taught to search and destroy. They had to surround the mock village at Cannungra. 'You don't go in kicking down no doors,' said the sergeant. 'You don't know what's behind any door.' They were trained to butt the door with their rifles and then withdraw and hit the ground in case there was a booby trap. Once inside a hut they had to watch their step, and look for loose floorboards and further traps.

'You're dead, son,' said the sergeant, twice, when Max missed a grenade on a shelf.

There were obstacle courses, the tropical firing course and the battle inoculation range. 'I don't like needles,' Bluey joked. They were subjected to live firing attacks. As they went through

their drills machine guns fired about fifteen feet over their heads.

'I hope they shoot as well as me,' Max murmured to Bluey, who didn't hear him because of the guns. Explosive charges of TNT were put in lanes alongside the assault course and detonated as they went past.

It rained non-stop at Mt Spec, a heavily rain-forested training area where they were sent on five-day patrols with full packs of seventy to eighty pounds, and their rifles. 'I think I'm going mouldy,' Max said.

In the jungle they were taught not to keep to the paths. They hacked out their own paths with machetes. 'That way you don't run into any unexpected rice eaters on the path,' said the sergeant.

At Cannungra they were officially told they were going to Vietnam. Elaine burst into tears. Max had to hang up and phone back in half an hour. She wasn't much better then. He told her he was booking a hotel room in Townsville and she and baby Trevor were to fly up for the two weeks leave he had before he left for Vietnam.

Dot's reaction was similar. She cried too. 'Those liberal bastards are not getting my son. He's not going.'

But Bill said, 'I did my time. He'll be all right, like I was. Especially after Cannungra. That's where they sent us before New Guinea. Great hole it was. But it taught you.'

Max didn't let Elaine stay in Townsville until HMAS Sydney sailed. He knew how upset she'd be on the day, and then he'd be upset too. He thought he might jump overboard rather than stand on deck and watch her and the kid on the wharf below. A lot of blokes sent their wives and girlfriends home. There were a few at the airport catching Elaine's plane.

'Just the blokes is best, mate,' said one soldier as the women and kids shambled on to the tarmac.

'Yeah, then you can go and have a few beers and forget all about it.'

CHAPTER 4:

AT SEA

'What do they think we are, bloody tropical plants?' Max said. The Sydney was hot and cramped, and showering time very brief because the ship didn't carry much water. It wasn't really suitable for tropical seas. The whole ship smelt of the men's jungle greens. Everyone preferred to sleep on deck.

They were kept fit by the physical education instructors who organised runs around the deck. The best part was rifle practice. They threw cans overboard at the back of the ship and tried to sink them.

The beer was cheap, but no drunkenness was allowed. The army did not want anyone falling overboard. 'Don't know what'd be worse,' Bluey said. 'A shark, or some of those slanty-eyed blokes.'

After twelve days at sea, the ship reached Vung Tan harbour. To the men lining the rails it looked just like a beach, except for the jungle background and all the men in army uniform everywhere you looked.

They were taken off the ship by Chinook helicopter, which could take a whole platoon at once. A very large, black US Army Sergeant hustled them into their seats. 'Boy, is he big,' whispered Bluey. 'I wouldn't want to meet him on a dark night.'

'Not that you'd see him,' said Max.

CHAPTER 5:
IN COUNTRY

Nui Dat was the Australian base. It had once been a rubber plantation. The hot muggy air and the rotting smell of the jungle, a bit like Mt Spec, were the first things the men noticed as they stood, disoriented, on the chopper pad.

Shit, this is real, Max thought at the sudden KABOOM of artillery.

'Ours,' said a soldier who noticed, with amusement, the sudden alarm on the faces of the new recruits. He and others were waiting to board the Chinook for the return trip to the Sydney, and then home to Australia.

'I suppose you blokes haven't even seen a nog yet,' said another soldier.

'The worst thing is you can't tell 'em apart. When I first saw all those black pyjamas in Vung Tan I couldn't understand it. They'd told us that was what the Viet Cong wore.'

'You never know whose side they're on.' Then they hoisted their gear and almost gambolled on board.

'Have fun,' they called out and 'See you later ... we hope!'

Not all the previous battalion moved out immediately. For two weeks they showed the new boys the ropes.

'So this is the Nui Dat Hilton,' Bluey said as they surveyed their

four man tent, with sandbags between sheets of corrugated iron around the walls.

'The cladding's a bit tacky.' There were duckboards on the floor and each man had a metal table, a camp stretcher and a locker.

'So's the decor.'

'Wait until the wet starts,' said a departing soldier. 'You've never seen mud like it, red, and as sticky as hell.' He grinned. 'Either dust or mud here, both red ... like blood.'

For the first two weeks they had refresher training on what was euphemistically called the Range, a piece of cleared land on the edge of the base. Max's firing skill pleased him. But only until he learned that he was to be a scout because he was so good. It's not bloody fair he thought. He was a big guy. The enemy were small. Why not have another small bloke out in front? He would stick out like a sore thumb.

In later months Max couldn't understand a few of the Rambos who came into their company as replacements, the smart arses who knew everything. He didn't argue. 'You do what you want, pal. See you,' he'd say. And he'd mutter to a mate, 'A mine'll get him if the nogs don't.'

When he first arrived he listened to the old hands. He didn't want to go home in a bodybag. In his platoon they had a sergeant and a corporal who were on their second tour. These two were always on their backs. There were three privates, too, who had already had a stint in Vietnam. 'Those two give you the shits, I know,' one of the privates said to Max. 'But they know what they're on about.'

On their very first patrol the brooding green silence was just as frightening as any sudden sounds. They were sweating, but cold at the same time. They saw nobody and nothing happened, but Max was so jumpy that he had to change his underpants six times.

'Take extra socks so your feet don't rot,' the corporal had told them. Max took four pairs, which he changed as often as he could. His spare pair of underpants was washed out in a creek. He'd put the wet undies in his pocket and they'd be dry in half an hour, which was just as well, he thought.

It was on his second patrol that he killed his first man. He felt sick. It wasn't like shooting a rabbit or a fox. There were shadowy figures flitting by to their left. He lifted his rifle and fired. He knew he'd hit one because he heard the thud of a body.

'Now go and check that it was one of theirs', said his sergeant. 'You couldn't possibly have identified your target properly.'

On another patrol two of his own platoon were shot close by him. He felt a rush of anger. You mongrels, he thought, and he wanted to get them. The platoon had been caught out in the open. Terry Green was standing beside Max when he was shot. He made terrible sounds as he lay on the ground. 'I can't move, I can't move,' he groaned. Then he started to gasp and pant. He died before they could do anything. Max never forgot the stunned look on his face and the way his eyes were open. He had always thought that people closed their eyes when they died.

Patrols varied in length from three to six days. Max started to worry every time they were to go out. Was he going to come back? Was anything going to happen to him? But once they were out there, patrolling, he knew he had to focus, he knew he had to put everything out of his head, except being alert. The others counted on the scouts.

In his platoon they all watched each other before they went out. If they were going out on a Wednesday they made sure nobody drank from Monday. They didn't want anyone with a hangover on patrol. It was different when they got back to base.

Then they'd drink to blot everything out. Everyone would be on the grog and then there'd be a punch-up.

'You wouldn't want to smell me when I get back.' Max wrote to Dot. They all stank, and showers came first, even before beer. He didn't tell Dot that they slept in their clothes when they were patrolling. All they had for protection was a waterproof anorak. And he didn't tell her that they only sometimes had toilet paper. Often they used grass or a few leaves. 'The food's crappy,' he wrote. They carried rations of tinned food like baked beans or stew, plus army biscuits and a little butter which had to be eaten the first day.

Bill had added a postscript to one of Dot's letters, 'How much territory have you taken?'

Max showed this to his mates.

'Thinks it's the fucking desert,' said one.

'Not like the old man's war,' Max said to Bluey. Most of the time they didn't know where they were going in the jungle. They were looking for the enemy. What counted were bodies, the number of VC or NVA killed.

He'd been sick when he found his first rotting corpse. The only dead bodies he'd seen in Australia had been his grandparents, laid out neatly in the funeral parlour, no smell, no blood, no gore, and no missing parts. The first corpse was so badly wounded that the top half of the body separated from the bottom half when they put toggle ropes around the wrists to drag it off the path. He couldn't eat for a couple of days. The stew or the beans on his plate looked like the spilled guts.

♦ ❖ ♦

One day Bluey asked, 'Why do you think we're here, mate?'

'Why do you think commie countries have those walls?' asked a passing corporal. 'To keep us out, or to keep their lot in?'

Max waited until the corporal was out of earshot. 'I reckon whatever LBJ wants, he only has to ask and the Australian government gives it him.' He paused and shook his head. 'I can't work it out. The French have been here, and then the Yanks, and now us. And nobody seems to be winning. Everyone knows the bloody Yanks are mad. Why do we follow them?'

None of the Australians liked to go out with the Americans. 'I'm not going out with those idiots,' Max used to say. 'They fire at the birds in the trees. And they're always high, always shooting stuff into their arms.'

Drugs weren't a big problem in Max's platoon, even in his company. Certainly some of the men used marijuana. But Max couldn't stand it. Besides, he knew you needed a clear head out there.

One morning they heard over the radio that the VC were in a village about two miles away. Four companies were sent to surround it. As people came out of their huts, the four hundred soldiers moved in. Everyone was herded into the village centre while the soldiers went from hut to hut searching for weapons or VC.

They found two men who had been wounded and left behind. Max went into one hut where there was an old couple huddled in a corner. He had to point his rifle at them and order them out. They could hardly walk they were trembling so much. They reminded him a bit of his grandparents. He wanted to tell them they'd be all right, that he'd look after them. When the search was finished the soldiers were ordered to destroy the village.

Max turned his eyes away from the old couple, and from the hate on the faces of the women and children as he set fire to their homes. Some stood there with tears running down their faces. He imagined how he would feel if someone came to burn

down his village. Burning down houses felt very wrong to him. But a soldier had to obey orders. He wasn't going to prison for a lot of nogs. Max was sure some of the villages they had destroyed were not VC villages. But the people would be now, he thought grimly.

♦ ❖ ♦

The rain was bucketing down, and there was a hole in the tent. Bluey put a dish under the trickle and they all settled down to enjoy the endless card games. Tonight they were playing poker. 'It's all right for you blokes, no missus to send your pay home to,' Max said when Bazza suggested upping the stakes.

'Oh, you'll still have enough for your grog and your soap, fussy bastard you are. Nothing wrong with army issue.'

Max punched him in the arm. 'I like to get clean. Need a bit of a lather.'

'Hear Danny Barnes was shipped home yesterday,' Bazza said with a grin. His time wasn't up, Max thought, but they all knew why. Danny wasn't wounded, but he couldn't hack it. It was the last patrol. He'd seemed OK, just a bit white when they were burying the enemy bodies. Somebody got the idea of hacking off a few arms and legs so the bodies would fit in the shallow graves.

When Danny got back to camp he had hysterics, screaming and crying for his mother. The men had looked away, then called the medic.

'I think I might start seeing little green men,' said Bluey.

'Yeah, perhaps they're the smart ones,' said Max.

But it takes all sorts, he thought. Some characters were just the opposite to Danny. They'd have their photos taken, standing by bodies they had just blown to bits. One bloke posed with an arm and a leg that had flown off after some nogs had been hit by machine gun fire. Their bodies had spun, and then bits flew off.

'When it stops pissing down, let's have a bit of fun,' Bluey said. It was dark when they crept over to the American camp and put flares in the cisterns, so that when the chains were pulled the flares went up. They hid and watched the first victim dive for the ground with his trousers around his ankles. They laughed so much they had to run back to their own barracks.

'Jesus,' said Bluey. 'Don't think much of their security.' He doubled up with laughter again. 'That was even better than cutting the wire!' The week before they had cut the wire around the outskirts of the American camp, pinned it back, and then watched as the Yanks ran around trying to find the enemy who must have broken into their camp.

Occasionally the Yanks retaliated. Their best effort had been throwing a mock grenade into the canteen while the Australians were all sitting around having a beer. Everyone dived and got out, to be jeered at by the laughing Yanks.

'They don't look too pleased to see us,' Max had said, the first time they went into Vungers (Vung Tan) for three days R and R. It was a boozy half hour ride with a couple of diggers even managing to fall off the vehicle. Nobody smiled, nobody waved at the soldiers.

Most of the soldiers were city born and bred, and they still stared at the Vietnamese who pedalled by on rickety bikes or trundled past in carts drawn by bullocks with saggy skin. Water buffalo ploughed the rice fields. It was as though the twentieth century had never happened.

In Vung Tan they were briefed by the military police at the Peter Badcoe Club, a centre built for soldier recreation. There were nearly two hundred bars in Vung Tan, they were told, and about three thousand bar girls. Everybody cheered. All the soldiers were issued with condoms and antibiotics, and were advised that if they wanted a girl, to attend to those needs before

they were drunk. And to wear condoms unless they wanted a dose. Some of the bars, they were told, were out of bounds. Bluey nudged Max and winked.

It was difficult to tell one bar from another. They were all dimly lit with girls in mainly Western dress, whose job it was to take as much money from the soldiers as possible. 'Buy me a Saigon tea, darling,' said one girl slipping her hand between Bluey's legs. They had been told about Saigon tea. It was usually coloured water that cost more than alcohol. A glass appeared before Bluey had a chance to open his mouth. Max grinned at him as Bluey pulled out his wallet.

The next afternoon they had a few beers at a bar and then went down to the beach. Some of them went water skiing in a boat supplied by one of the local businesses. 'Too fancy for me,' said Max. He and Bluey and Bazza swam for a while and then lay on the sand, drinking more beer. There were a few Americans there too.

'Couldn't you fight this by yourselves?' called Bluey.

'Yeah, why did you have to send for us? Too scared on your own?' Max added. The next minute they were in a punch-up with the Yanks. God, this is stupid, Max thought, as if there wasn't enough fighting going on in the jungle. But they had all had too much to drink to be well coordinated, and nobody was hurt much.

When they got back to their lines, one of the corporals put his head around the tent flap. 'Right you bludgers. There'll be no more playing around. Three day patrol day after tomorrow. You'll be up before sparrow fart.'

♦ ❖ ♦

'Have to admire them. They're bloody good at getting out of tight places,' Max said when they finally stormed the bunkers and

stood at the cross point of the X-patterned shelter system. One minute it had seemed to be full of the enemy actively defending, and the next minute they were gone. They found an escape tunnel, used when the Australian grenades hit their mark. They had been alerted to the bunker system because of the felled trees. Slender trees were used to build the bunkers.

The stumps were camouflaged, and it was an alert corporal who noticed them. 'See,' he said. 'Recently felled. Be bunkers in the area, not really close, cunning bastards, but not too far either.'

♦ ❖ ♦ ❖ ♦

'Well you blokes have had it easy, right from the start, arriving in that chopper. Bloody luxury. They brought us from Vung Tan in an open truck, back to back we sat, in two rows, like a lot of cattle. And then not a single fucking bullet came anywhere near you.'Their time was nearly up. Ron Disher was a regular and had been at Long Tan on his first tour. He had been sent home wounded.

'Lots of blokes never get hit,' said Max. 'Know when to keep our heads down.'

'Fat lot of good that would have been at Long Tan. Outnumbered 10 to 1 we were, and then only eighteen of our blokes were killed compared with 250 of theirs. Jesus, they just kept coming. I was never so glad to retreat in my life.'

'Yeah,' said Bluey. 'We've heard all about the great battle.'

'Hundreds of times,' said Max. 'I'm just glad our time's up in this rotten place.'

But it seemed unreal that in less than two weeks they'd be back in Australia, back for good.

CHAPTER 6:

WELCOME HOME

'Oh, mate, I don't want the folks meeting the ship, the old woman blubbering ... you know. They can pick me up at Albury station.'

'Not even Sydney?'

'Why come to Sydney? They won't want to come to Sydney.'

HMAS Sydney berthed in Queensland with the returning soldiers. They were allowed a couple of hours with their families before the march through Townsville, in slouch hats and khaki, which felt strange after jungle greens.

People lined the streets, but they didn't cheer much. 'Some of them seem just as enthusiastic as the nogs,' Bluey said out of the corner of his mouth. And there were protesters, just as there had been when they first went into the army.

'Murderers,' someone called out. Should be the bloody government they're attacking, not us, Max thought. He hadn't decided to go to Vietnam. It wasn't his choice.

He remembered his parents' stories about the welcome returning troops received after World War 2. He was resentful, and hurt, by the nearly silent crowd, even more than by the placard wavers. The soldiers were like animals on display for entertainment. The crowd was just curious. What did they know

about what it was like in Nam? He'd like to see them crawling through the mud, sweating in filthy greens, never knowing when they'd be shot.

Max flew to Sydney and then caught the train to Albury, where he was met by his parents and brothers and sisters. As he strode along the platform, Max noticed everyone lean back slightly, uncertain grins on their faces. Then Dot rushed forward and cried. 'Glad you're home, son.' And she patted him, moving her hand over his back and shoulders, down his arms and across his chest.

Max grinned. 'All my bits and pieces are still there, Mum.'

'Well, what was it like?' Bill pumped his hand.

Max turned away. 'Mind your business.' He didn't want to talk to his father about Vietnam. He didn't want to talk to anyone about it.

'Come on, mate, into the car. And home,' said his brother, Donny. He picked up Max's kit, and slung it over his shoulder. He kept looking at his young brother, and shaking his head. 'I think you've shot up another twelve inches.'

In the car, Max felt like a rabbit with a spotlight in its eyes. Nothing seemed real: the traffic, the shops, all the colours - the reds and yellows and blues. In Nam everything was black and green. He felt he should still be back in the jungle with the blokes. He stared at the back of his father's head. Father. Mother. Brother. It didn't mean anything.

After tea he showed Dot his ribbons that they were all given to wear on their uniforms. 'You will look nice,' she said. She looked at him. 'Why didn't Elaine come to Albury?'

Max didn't look at her. 'She thinks I'm still in Queensland. Told her to wait in Melbourne. I'll go down in a day or two. Give her a surprise.'

Dot shook her head, and sniffed. 'You should let her know you're coming.'

That evening there were some shooters after rabbits in the paddocks at the back of the house. Max hit the floor at the first shot. His empty hands were shaking. Dot stared at him and felt her happiness ebbing. This wasn't her boy.

The same thing happened the next day when she took him shopping. A car backfired and he hit the road. Everyone stared as she helped him up.

'It's all right, son.'

'I think that boy should see a doctor,' his auntie Beryl said. 'He's a bundle of nerves, and at his age!'

♦ ❖ ♦

In Melbourne, on his way to Elaine's mother's house, a couple of long-haired hoons called out to Max, 'How many women and children have you killed?'

He breathed in hard, but suddenly remembered a woman and her children bathing in a creek, and Bazza opening fire on them. The creek was red with their blood. 'You can't trust any of them,' Bazza had said.

Max kept walking, but he was so jumpy. Even a car door slamming was enough to make him drop. I'll never get there, he thought, as he picked himself up for the sixth time.

He turned on his heel and crossed the road when a group of Vietnamese approached him, talking, laughing, happy. He stared after them. How did he know he wasn't firing at them a month ago? Coming over in boats they were. They didn't belong here. They had better stay out of his way.

He was breathing heavily when he opened Elaine's mum's gate. Her mother opened the door. 'Elaine,' she called. 'Look what's on the doorstep.'

You old bag, Max thought, you never liked me. But she shook his hand.

'Tone's here,' Elaine said, as she hugged him. He didn't let go of her as they walked into the kitchen.

'G'day, mate.' Tony laughed and pumped his hand. 'What'd I miss?'

Max shrugged. 'Where's the kid?' Trevor ran to his mother.

'Aren't you going to show your dad how you walk?' His grandmother tried to pull the child away from his mother.

'Let him be. I must look a rare sight. He'll have to get used to me all over again.' Max couldn't take his eyes off his son, his clean white skin, his blue eyes. He hadn't seen one European child in Vietnam.

♦ ❖ ♦

But Max was restless in the old St Kilda house. He didn't know what to do with himself. Tony dropped in all the time. He took Max to the pub and the footie. Max knew Elaine found him a bit strange. He was a bundle of nerves. He often saw Tony and Elaine look at each other. They probably talked about him.

He met a few of his old St Kilda mates at the pub. One of them, Gary, said, 'Your missus has been playing up, mate.'

'No, not her,' Max said. He had never worried about Elaine like that. He knew a few of the blokes over there who had. Poor old Bluey. His girl had written him a Dear John letter while they were still in Nam. He'd shown it to Max. 'Better off without her, mate.'

'Don't worry about me. She'll be apples.' But he was very quiet that night. The next day Bluey nearly stepped on a mine. Max had grabbed him just in time. But after that he was as noisy as ever.

♦ ❖ ♦

Elaine was soon pregnant again. She had wanted him to wear a franger, said he needed time to settle down before they had another kid. But he refused.

'Like eating a lolly with the paper on,' he said. And he saw no reason to wait. Trevor needed a brother, or a sister. He wanted to be around for this one.

Then one day he came home and found Tony and Elaine kissing on the couch. He stood quite still. 'So, it's true?'

'Yes,' Elaine said.

Max left the house without saying another word. He went to Gary's place. 'Can I borrow your shotgun, mate?'

Gary nodded. 'Here it is.' He put the gun in a bag. Not another word was spoken.

Max stopped at a phone box and rang Donny. 'Meet me at The Swan. I want to get drunk,' he said. Donny's car was already there when he arrived. Max slid the gun into the boot before joining his brother. 'Elaine and Tony have been having it off,' he said.

'Yeah, I thought there might be something like that. You need a few beers, mate.'

♦ ❖ ♦

Donny drove Max back to Elaine's later in the afternoon. 'I've got to take something in for the kid,' Max said. 'It's in the boot.'

Donny was still sitting behind the steering wheel when Max blew every window out of the house. He fired ten shots. The boom of the gun and the shattering glass brought all the neighbours into the street. 'Let's go,' Max said, wrenching the car door open. He stood the gun between his knees. A few streets away he insisted Donny let him out. 'Just disappear,' he told his brother.

The police picked him up a few minutes after Donny drove

off. They wanted to know who was the driver of the car. 'Wouldn't know,' said Max.

'Some stranger pick you up?'

'Yeah.'

He felt quite numb, and it was only later that he was relieved that Elaine and Tony, afraid of what he might do, had left the house with Trevor long before he returned with the gun.

He was not charged with attempted murder because the house had been empty. He was charged with discharging a firearm in a public place and with the intention of committing an indictable offence.

His barrister wanted him to plead insanity. 'You're not putting that on me, making out I'm an idiot, like I'm going cuckoo.' He told the barrister that he had wanted to shoot them both at the time. He knew what he was doing.

Max's recent return from Vietnam was the only plea the barrister could make. The judge said that was no excuse for violence. The prosecuting lawyer made much of the fact that Max might have killed his son. It was not a popular war. The jury found him guilty. He was sentenced to gaol for three years.

His last sight as he left the courtroom between two cops was his mother's face, staring at him, her mouth slightly open. He looked round for Elaine, but she was not there.

CHAPTER 7:
PRISON

'You old bastard! How was your time over there?' It took Max a moment to recognise Ernie. In prison everyone looked the same blue-grey, even the faces.

And school, St Kilda, all that kids' stuff, seemed so long ago.

Max shrugged. 'I didn't mind it.'

'You'll be right when you get out of here. Rob a bank. Shoot people.' Ernie laughed.

'Yeah! Get out of it. What are you in for?'

Ernie laughed again. 'A bit of this, a bit of that.'

Ernie wasn't the only one Max knew. There were several blokes in Pentridge from his old days knocking around St Kilda. They all wanted to slap him on the back, pump his hand. He noticed one of the screws watching him intently, the one who had taken him to his cell yesterday, the one who had shown him how to fold the blankets. 'That's how we do things here.' And then the screw flung the blankets on the floor. 'Now you do it.'

His mates yanked a young scared looking bloke who had just sat down to breakfast off the bench to make room for them all to sit together. 'The old burgoo!' Ernie stood a spoon upright in the porridge. They all counted until it fell. 'Grade A today.' Everyone laughed. Max looked at the thick sticky mess. He did not feel hungry. 'Ron tried it as glue for his models,' Ernie said and roared

with laughter. 'Might be weetbix tomorrow. Even a googie twice a week.' There was a mug of black tea, very strong, and a mixture of sugar and condensed milk. 'Learn to like black tea, mate. There's only enough milk for the burgoo.' Max mixed his milk into the porridge. 'Second right of the prisoner - food that is adequate to maintain the health and well-being of the prisoner. But only if you've got a strong stomach.' Ernie rattled the words off and then laughed.

Max remembered the prisoner's rights being read to him in the reception centre. He had moved stiffly as directed, his senses struggling to cope: the smell of sweat and lysol and urine, and defeat; the cold stony gloom of the place; the chilling sound of the corrugated roller door closing behind the van; the pathetic collection of personal property confiscated - toothpaste, soap, his watch, his money; the strip search; the compulsory shower. His mates' voices broke in on his thoughts again.

'Hope you like cabbage.'

'And bloody yeast buns.'

'You can always eat the bread.'

A bell rang. 'First muster,' said Ernie. 'Then I'm off to do billets. Fills in the day.'

One of his old mates was not in a work gang. He took Max into the exercise yard and then the activity centre where they lifted a few weights.

'The way to survive in here is put your mind in neutral, and coast. Don't let the buggers get to you. Watch out. Here comes McPherson.'

McPherson was the screw who stared in the mess hall. 'What's your name?' He had already asked this question four times. He was much shorter than Max.

♦ ❖ ♦ ❖ ♦

Months later Max was allocated to the number plate workshop. He stood at a machine all the time, stamping out the new numberplates. All Victorian cars had numberplates made in the prison.

Before he was allocated to work he got two dollars a week to spend in the canteen. Work meant he got five dollars. And he was glad to escape the chook pen where prisoners slouched around and gossiped and taunted each other and fought. A few ran round and round the exercise yard. The activity centre palled very soon - cards, TV, the library. He kept fit but couldn't spend hours in the gym like some blokes did. Each day had yawned before him. Work meant escape from McPherson too and old Barney who talked all the time about how he shouldn't be in prison because he was innocent. Ernie told him that Barney had been in a big bank robbery. He shot a customer who tried to stop them. 'He's been here so long I think he believes he was innocent. You know, the gun was shoved in his hand and it went off.' Ernie was always laughing. It began to irritate Max.

As the heavy iron door of his cell was locked and bolted at 4:30 for the night Max felt both relieved and helpless. He was alone except for the spy hole that seemed to bore through his skull. He had tried smearing it with grease, but was always told to wipe it clean. He jumped whenever he heard footsteps in the passage.

In the first days he had flicked the radio channel on ... and off. And switched the TV on ... and off. He read, but found he was reading the same page over and over, or that he had turned the pages, his eyes following the print, but his brain not understanding a word. He yawned, he stretched. The cell was too small to pace. The bed took up most of the room. The stainless steel toilet was an arm's reach from the bed.

After he had been in prison for some weeks, he could settle to

read or watch TV, but a love scene would agitate him so much that he wanted to kick the set.

He wished he could press a button and stop his mind. It was like a film running too fast - the jungle, explosions, bodies, dead faces, rifles, choppers ... Elaine, Trevor ... and the new baby. Was it born yet?

♦ ❖ ♦

Dot came in red-faced, glaring at the screws lounging against the wall, their mouths drooping, fingers fidgeting with keys and belts. 'They searched my handbag,' Dot hissed at him, and then stared at the glass box where he sat, his shoulders hunched.

'Must be your evil appearance.'

Dot's face crumbled. 'Oh love, I want to hug you.'

Max stretched his legs. Being in this glass box was just how he felt, cut off, a freak. 'You don't have to come every fortnight.'

'But I want to.'

'Don't worry about me. I'm good. I'm doing fine.'

'Ya Dad'll come next time.'

'Too far for the old codger.'

There was silence while each tried to think of something to say.

'How's ...'

'How's ...'

They both spoke at the same time. Max eyed the clock on the wall. Donny and his wife, Gwen, came with Dot last time. At least there were the four of them to keep the talk up. And Donny's wife was a chatterbox.

Max's prison clothes were ill-fitting. 'Tuck your shirt in,' said Mc Pherson. 'Do up your buttons.' Max made his face blank and obeyed. Ernie made a point of rising on his toes whenever

McPherson spoke to him, but Max thought that was stupid. The screws called the tune there.

There was a letter from Gwen, with a cutting from *The Sun*, a birth notice. *Wilson - To Elaine, a daughter, Kerry Elaine, sister for Trevor*. He had a daughter. Her name was Kerry. He said the name several times, but it sounded empty. There was no one there. He had no children. The notice was right. The baby had no father.

He pinned pictures of girls, cut from magazines, on his walls like everyone else, but the thing he most fantasised about was green - walking on grass, seeing trees.

CHAPTER 8:
ON THE ROAD

When Max was ten he had a collection of footie cards, the biggest collection in his grade. He remembered sitting on the pier with Ernie and Gary, swinging their legs over the edge. They had dangled fishing lines baited with mussels scraped from the bollards under the pier. Max swapped Ernie six marbles for ten St Kilda cards, but when he tucked them under the rubber band holding the cards, the rubber snapped and the cards spilled out of his hand. The wind blew a few into the water, a few more slipped through the gaps between the planks, and some were spoiled by the damp and grit underfoot.

That was how he felt now, like those cards with the rubber band about to burst. He had imagined that he would feel elated about his release, but he didn't.

It started about two months ago, a leaden feeling. He woke during the night, and worried, about stupid things, things that happened years ago. Like those cars he used to pinch when he was a kid. What if someone knew about that and told the cops? What if he had to do extra time because of that? He had smashed up one car when a dirty big truck ran him off the road into a telephone pole. The truck didn't even stop. Or he worried that there might be some stupid bureaucratic mistake and his release would be delayed. Like his parole papers being mislaid in a filing

cabinet. It happened. He remembered the same symptoms in other prisoners - twitchy, distracted. He had thought they were mad. He understood now.

Time had dragged even more during the last months. Now it was racing. Only days to go. He remembered coming home from Vietnam and feeling alienated from his family ... from Elaine. He realised, with a sick feeling, it would be the same getting out of prison.

He had been as bad as the others, though with him it had been little things. *When I get out I'm gunna eat steak every night ... go to bed at 2 am ... sleep in till noon ... camp in the bush ...* all sorts of little things that became enormously important when they were denied. Now he could not see himself outside the prison walls. He didn't know what he wanted to do, where he wanted to be.

♦ ❖ ♦

When he walked through the prison door into Sydney Road he recognised his father's car. 'Come on, son, we're taking you home.' Dot jumped out and opened the back door. Max stood still. She beckoned. Max climbed in. He was used to following orders. But he hardly said a word on the trip north.

He could hardly bear to be in his parents' house. But nor could he bear to see people. He slept late, and sat hunched over the kitchen table with the paper. He cut wood for Dot, hung out the washing, but he wouldn't go shopping. He watched TV long after his parents had gone to sleep, then went to bed and read, sometimes till dawn.

'Why don't you go to the pub with your Dad?' Dot asked. 'You never seem to go now.'

He did once, twice, but he could not sit for long with his elbows on the bar. He couldn't yarn to the blokes there. He had

to slip away. Sometimes he walked at night. The smell of the eucalypts was the only thing that gave him pleasure. He didn't want to knock around with his old mates. Besides, most of them were married, with kids and steady jobs. Even Bluey was.

One day he did rise early. Dot raised her eyebrows. 'Dressed before ten?' Max just grunted. He ate quickly. He didn't even look at the paper. Dot heard the back door slam.

He was back in an hour driving a blue panel van. She knew he still had money from his army pay.

Dot listened to him come in and root around in the linen press. She peeped around the door and saw him with a bundle of old grey blankets in his arms. Then the door of the panel van slammed. She listened to him open drawers and cupboards in his room. He came into the kitchen carrying a large bag. 'See you,' he said. He pecked her cheek. She heard the van rocket down the road. She knew better than to ask questions.

Max stopped in Albury at the army disposal store and bought a couple of pots, a frying pan, and a mess tin. He had no plans. Just cruise around, maybe work sometimes. Just keep moving.

He stayed away from cities, away from the coast, and followed the straight red roads north, through mile after mile of bleached grass, fences strung with wire that hummed in the wind, occasional low homesteads, iron roofs visible among gum trees. Sometimes emus raced along the fence beside him.

His bed was the back of the van. He gathered wood for a fire and fried chops and boiled his billy, then lay on his back under the black canopy of sky, and stared at the stars. The moon rose like a huge balloon and floated free of the earth, and he felt some of the tight feeling drip away, like water draining from a wet car.

He stayed two nights at Lightning Ridge, fascinated by the alien landscape - the white chalky ground, the mounds of tailings, a few scrubby trees - and the dusty, obsessed men. It

was primitive mining, with claim notices, *Possession*, nailed to posts. Old trucks powered the rusty contraptions that raised buckets of earth and rock and dumped them on the trays of the trucks. At the puddling dam even older trucks turned the puddling buckets to wash away the dross. Men in dusty cords or moleskins squatted and sifted through the puddled rock, spread on tarpaulins, hoping for the glint of opal. Two tall German brothers with close-cropped hair showed him their finds; their opals did not look anything like the polished stones in rings.

After he had been travelling for a while he took jobs for two or three months, never longer. He worked on cattle stations. At Corryong he had learned to ride. He helped at mustering times when the calves were separated from their mothers or fat bullocks gathered for sale; or pulled bogged cattle from dams, chains around their horns. It's a life, he thought, riding with the cattle stringing through the grass, but he couldn't stay anywhere for long.

At one station the manager smoked a lot. His hand trembled when he lit a match. He was about the same age as Max, with a wife who walked carefully, as though on broken glass. There were children, three of them. The eldest had scaly skin with raw patches, which he scratched. The manager yelled at the child. 'Over there was he? ' Max asked once when the child ran sobbing into the house and the manager made the wheels of his truck squeal in the dirt. The wife nodded. She told Max that the younger children were worse. One had perforated eardrums and the other a twisted foot. 'I dunno,' he said. 'They said they were spraying to kill the mozzies.' But he had heard of Agent Orange. He had read about it in the papers. He'd thought it was blokes malingering, trying to rort the system. Maybe there was more to it than that. Maybe it was making kids sick.

He picked up hitchhikers who occasionally travelled with him

for two or three weeks. They were usually as silent as he was.

'Bloody hot.'

'Goin' far?'

'Any work around?'

One night he yelled and woke his companion. 'Bad dream, mate. That's all.' He had dreamt that he was trying to wipe his face and arms and chest; they were splattered with soft bloody flesh, human brains.

He went prawn trawling and hated it. It reminded him of being on patrol. Several days and nights of broken sleep. Woken every three hours to wind the net in. Sometimes coral or rock ripped the net. The catch was tipped into the sorting tray and the prawns separated from the jelly fish and dugong weed and sometimes bigger creatures like sharks and octopus, and once, a turtle.

He met some characters. A bloke rattled into Darwin in an old Ford Tourer which looked as though it were held together by wire. There was a boat, for crocodile hunting, on the hood, with rifles and camping gear. He yarned with the driver in the pub, but shook his head when invited to go croc shooting.

The worst job he ever had was in an abattoir. He thought about becoming a vegetarian after that. He had never thought about how meat got to the table. He did odd jobs at the abattoir, filling in wherever he was needed. Herding the terrified beasts up the raised gangway to their deaths by compressed air gun. The clattering of hooves on planks all day. Sluicing the slimy floor after the butchering on the assembly line. Helping to make fertiliser from the waste meat and blood and bones; they were cooked into a dark jelly and then dried. It all made him think of Vietnam, and the sour smell of slaughter stayed with him for weeks.

He travelled all over Australia, even took the van on the ferry

to Tasmania. Sometimes he met women but it never lasted long. He didn't write to his mother but he dropped in a few times, just passing through.

'You never know when you're going to pop your head in the door,' Dot said. His Auntie Beryl was there once and said he should get a steady job.

'What for?' he said.

When he was thirty-five he was passing through Corryong one day and he found Dot quite distracted. 'Oh, love,' she said, and burst into tears. 'It's your Dad. He's real crook.' Bill was in bed. He was struggling to breathe.

'What's the doc say?' Dot shook her head.

Max decided to hang around the district for a while. He found a month's work at a service station in Albury while a regular was on holiday. After that there was another service station in Wangaratta, then a different one back in Albury. He was still moving around but not far. At first he still slept in his van, down by the river. Then he found a room in a boarding house in Albury, and he realised, quite surprised, that he had been in the old district for nearly six months. Maybe he was getting too old for all that wandering crap.

Bill died just before Donny and Gwen's silver wedding. Dot asked Max to drive her to Melbourne for the party. 'Oh no,' Max said. Except for the funeral last month he hadn't seen his brothers and sisters for years. But he agreed to drive her, though he wasn't going to the party.

'Just as you like, love,' Dot said.

When they arrived at the house in Prahran, Dot asked Max to carry her present to the front door for her. 'What have you got in here?' Max said, picking up a huge box wrapped in silver paper.

'A wok,' said Dot. Max stared at his mother. He was surprised she even knew what a wok was. 'It's what Gwennie wants,' she said.

'Oh no you don't,' Donny said when Max put the big box down and started to back away from the front door. Donny grabbed his arm, and then Gwen was on the other side, and he found himself inside the house. Donny put a glass of beer in his hand, and Max propped himself up against the wall.

Gwen was a good sort, he thought. Donny was a lucky bugger. Twenty five years.

'That wasn't too bad now, was it?' Dot said as they were driving home the next morning. Dot had slept in the spare bedroom after the party, but Max insisted he'd be all right in the van.

'Suppose not.' He kept his eyes on the road. 'I'll have to be moving on again soon,' he said. Dot said nothing, and took out her knitting.

♦ ❖ ♦

Three months later Donny phoned. He had a friend with a service station who needed an experienced man. Some young bloke had just walked out. He wanted an older bloke. Why didn't Max give it a go? He could stay with him and Gwen until he decided whether he liked it. They'd like the company now the kids were all grown up and flown the nest. 'Go on, love,' Dot said. 'I'll be all right. Do you good to see the bright lights for a bit.' She smiled. 'You said it was time to move on.'

♦ ❖ ♦ ❖ ♦

The service station was busy. Sometimes Max was running from one customer to the next. He liked Donny's friend. He was a good boss, not afraid to put his back into it.

Soon Max was helping the mechanics too, not just filling tanks. He liked engines, and he was strong and could lift heavy weights.

After he had been there for two years the boss left him in charge on Sunday mornings. Max sat in the office with the radio on softly, feeling as though it was his own place. Usually it was quiet, though sometimes a young bloke would screech to a stop beside a bowser, trying to impress a girl in the front seat. Max always walked out slowly when a car roared in like that, especially if the young bloke jumped out and stood tapping his fingers on the roof of the car.

'Fill her up, Pop,' a youngster with hair down his back and torn jeans said to him one Sunday. Max was startled. Pop? Was he that old?

Then he injured his back lifting a drum of oil. At first he couldn't stand up. The doctor said he had to rest, no work at all for at least three months, probably longer.

Sometimes he talked about getting a place of his own. 'No hurry, mate,' Donny always said. And Gwen squeezed his shoulder and said he was no trouble. When he hurt his back he had been living with Donny and Gwen for five years. It was hard to believe.

CHAPTER 9:
CONNECTIONS

Max hated supermarkets, but he had to get out of the house. So he started doing the weekly shopping for Gwen. Gwen said it was great. She and Donny could sleep in Saturday mornings instead of fighting the traffic and the crowds at Prahran. 'Good on you, mate,' Donny said. 'Only time we can have a bit of a cuddle now that Gwennie's on nights.'

'I'm up every Saturday before you've stopped snoring,' Gwen said. 'Here's the list, love. Make sure you get Golden crumpets, not Hardy's like you did last week.'

Donny winked at Max. 'Bet she couldn't tell the difference.' Gwen swatted Donny with the tea towel.

♦ ❖ ♦

Max went to the supermarket on Tuesdays. He had worked out that this was the quietest day. On Thursdays and Fridays, trolleys, if you could find one, bumped into each other, aisles were blocked if anyone stopped to reach something, and there were long queues at the checkouts. He went about ten o'clock. Kids at school and only a few young mums with toddlers, though some of them were already whingeing.

He wished they wouldn't keep changing things around. It took him ten minutes to find the biscuits, now in aisle ten instead

of four. He daydreamed while he shopped. Sometimes he found he had walked past the bread or the marge and not even seen it. And he had to go back down the same aisle.

One day he was drifting past the fruit juice when a voice called him. He turned around and found a woman with blonde hair, dark at the roots, beaming at him. 'Max, don't you remember me?' He stared at her. She was about his age, short, a bit dumpy. He noticed the nicotine stains on her fingers.

'Yvonne! You know! Dennis's wife.'

Max continued to stare. Christ. Elaine's sister-in-law. They went to her wedding. Skinny as a rake she was then. He opened his mouth.

'Don't I get a kiss?' said Yvonne. Max's lips brushed her cheek.

'Trevor and Kerry have been trying to get in touch with you.' Max's mouth went dry. He clenched his fists. 'Kerry's sixteen now. You never saw her did you? Pretty she is. Like Elaine.'

The old bag had slammed the door in his face when he'd gone round to see Elaine and the kids, after Pentridge. She refused to tell him where they'd gone. It was obvious Elaine wasn't living with her mother any more. He'd kept watch for a few days.

'Young Kerry's determined to find you. She went to Corryong, you know. Found out about your mum and dad. So there was no-one there to help her.'

Max pushed his hands into his pockets. 'Dad died a few years ago, Mum last year.'

'Well?' said Yvonne. 'Where are you living? Can I give them your address? Phone number?'

Max swallowed. 'I suppose so.'

Yvonne scribbled Donny's address and phone number on the top of a packet of cake mix. 'Must fly. Take care.'

Max could not concentrate on the rest of the shopping. The girl at the checkout, with her smooth unlined face, would be

about the same age as Kerry. He didn't know whether he wanted to see her. To see them. Trevor too. Trevor would be driving now, and going to pubs.

'Where's the detergent? And the tomato sauce? You forgot the lard too. No chips this week.' Gwen looked at Max. 'What's up? You feeling crook?'

Max shook his head. He went into his room and sat on the edge of his bed. What would they want? What would he say?

When Gwen called him for tea he sat at the table, silent, cutting his meat into squares, but not eating. He jumped when the phone rang. His heart was racing. 'For you, Max,' Gwen said. 'Some young bimbo.' She smiled at him.

The voice on the phone called him Dad, and cried. He had to keep swallowing. There were silences. A few words. More tears. Then a male voice. Trevor's. They arranged to meet the next day at St Kilda beach, near the pier. He couldn't stand to meet them inside, hemmed up in a room.

'You look like you've seen a ghost,' said Gwen. Max told Gwen and Donny about meeting Yvonne, that Kerry and Trev lived in Queensland now, that they had come to Melbourne, especially to find him.

He slept badly that night.

♦ ❖ ♦

Everything was confused when he thought about the day later. Kerry's blonde hair streaming behind her in the wind. She talked the most. Trev was as embarrassed as he was. They gripped hands. Kerry flung her arms around him. He patted her shoulder. He had to keep blinking. They walked along the beach. It's easier to talk while you walk, Kerry said. Then they had lunch at that kiosk on the pier. Climbed upstairs. Salt streaked windows. They had fish and chips. He couldn't eat

much. Trev finished Max's chips. Kerry was still at school. She wanted to be a teacher. 'You stick at it,' he had said. 'Don't want to be a no-hoper like your Dad.' And she cried again. Trev was in a garage. Always tinkering with engines, Kerry told him. They seemed to like each other.

'Are you going to see them again?' Gwen asked.

'Yeah. They're here for another week.'

'Well, ask them for tea.'

'Oh, gee ...'

'Go on. Ring now.'

♦ ❖ ♦

'She's a lovely kid, Max. And Trev's a good lad too.' Max nodded, his mouth twitching at the corners.

'Talk the leg off an iron pot, that girl,' said Donny. 'Not like her old man.'

Max grinned. 'We're going to write to each other. She wants me to visit them in Queensland. Have to save up.' Max felt warm, as though he'd been sun baking all afternoon. 'I'll see about getting back to work soon. Me back is starting to feel better now.'

'I think you should do one of the courses at the TAFE first. You know that brochure I brought home from the council?' Max had flung it in a drawer. What did he want to be going to school for at his age? So his spelling might be better when he writes to Kerry, Gwen said. And to get a job that wouldn't hurt his back.

CHAPTER 10:
SCHOOL

Max was interviewed at the TAFE College by a gentle woman with a soft voice. She leant across her desk towards him. He sat back in his chair. He didn't tell her much, nothing about Vietnam, or Elaine or Kerry. Just that he'd been out of work. Crook back. His hand shook when he had to write for her. 'About anything you like,' she said. 'Your family, your hobbies, why you want to come here. It doesn't matter. Anything.'

He wrote about shopping for Gwen, four or five lines. The gentle woman smiled when she read it. 'I wish you could do mine too,' she said. She told him classes started the next week. Max filled in the enrolment form, but he wasn't sure whether he'd go.

♦ ❖ ♦

When he arrived for his first class he felt almost as bad as his first patrol in Vietnam. His hands were clammy and he had been to the toilet twice before the class even started. The students sat in a circle and talked to each other. Slowly his shoulders dropped as the noise level rose. It sounded more like a party than a classroom. He looked at the others properly then. Mixed bunch. Kids as young as Kerry, and several a bit older, blokes and women, and one woman who must be as old as him. Her name

was Claire. She had half smiled at him as if to say, two old fools. Kerry had written that she thought it was a great idea for Max to go to school. This was partly why he made himself turn up. It was something useful to do while his back was getting better, Kerry wrote.

Max did not say much in class, but he listened. Some of those young ones could talk. That was all it seemed to be sometimes. Talk. But it was better than hanging around the house. He usually went for a walk along Chapel Street at lunchtime.

One afternoon he was walking down High Street when he saw Claire standing with her hands on her hips by an old Ford. She looked up. 'Bloody flat,' she said, pointing to the back wheel.

'Your car?'

She nodded.

'I can change it for you.' He put his bag down, and went to the boot.

'Oh thanks, Max. I'm always worried that I won't tighten the nuts enough.'

'I don't know why you bother driving here. All those parking hassles.'

'It's quicker.'

'Where do you live?'

'Down by the beach.'

'St Kilda?'

'Bit further.' Claire changed the subject. 'You're a quiet one. We don't hear much from you in class.' Claire always had her say, especially in English. And she often volunteered to read out what she wrote to the class: stories about her grandmother, her first dance, her wedding day. Max didn't know how she could. He only ever wrote a few lines and wouldn't show them to anyone except the teacher who said nobody had to read aloud unless they wanted to. 'I haven't heard anything you've written.'

'Mine's never any good,' he said. Claire shook her head.

'It's all right, once you do. The first time I read my hands were shaking so much I nearly dropped the paper.'

'Not for me.' Max straightened up slowly. His back hurt, but he was not going to let on to Claire.

'I'll shout you lunch tomorrow as a thank you,' Claire said. She hopped into the car, and wound the window down. 'I'll meet you at the caf after Maths.'

'All right.' Max grinned.

♦ ❖ ♦

They sat at a table outside with their pies and coffee. It was quieter. 'I still don't understand that stuff we did in Maths today. Do you?'

Max shook his head. 'Clear as mud.' They laughed.

'You got kids?'

Max hesitated. 'No.'

'Married?'

'No.'

'I was married,' Claire said, and shrugged. 'Not any more.'

Max leaned back in his chair. 'You got kids?'

'Yep. Two girls. And one grandson. Another one on the way.' She paused. 'My Kylie couldn't wait to get married. I just hope it works out better than mine did.'

'Where's your old man?'

'Don't know, don't care.'

They both fell silent.

'Time for English,' Claire said suddenly. She picked up her bag. 'I'll have one more smoke and see you up there.'

They got into the habit of lunching together. Sometimes two or three of the others joined them. Claire said they were becoming parent figures for the young ones. They learned little

bits about each other. Claire talked a lot, and asked questions. 'I'm nosey,' she said. Max told her about Donny and Gwen, how they teased each other all the time. Towards the end of the year he told her that he had been married. 'I was only a kid.'

'What happened?'

'She liked someone else better.' Claire made a face.

'Did you have any children?'

Max hesitated. 'Yes, two.' And he told Claire about Kerry and Trevor tracking him down. She just sat there smiling at him.

♦ ❖ ♦

'You still haven't told me where you live,' Max said one day. Claire was evasive about exactly where her flat was. 'What if I want to look you up during the holidays?' They had both decided to come back for another year at the college.

'It takes a while for an old dog to learn new tricks,' Max had said. Besides his old job at the service station had been filled.

At least he had learnt now how to write a letter to apply for a job. He was happier writing business letters and his opinions about things like euthanasia. He couldn't write much, but he could write down what he thought, a few sentences. They had a great debate in class about the right to die. Funny, he had never thought about that before, some people wanting to die. But writing stories about himself still bothered him. He'd rather stick to impersonal things, no feelings, just facts.

Claire looked at Max before she answered. 'My old man was violent. The only man I let inside my place is my son-in-law.' She laughed. 'And I'm a bit reluctant to do that.'

'All right. All right. How about we meet at the Astor. Take in a flick?'

'I'd like that.' They smiled at each other.

After the film Claire told him about her marriage, and how she

had run away. 'It was at the end of the 70's. There were women's refuges. Hadn't been around long. I found out about an address somehow, not sure how. Things were whispered around. I'd been trying to save some money. My running away from Oscar money I called it.' She gave a sort of smothered laugh. 'When I heard about the refuge, I thought I didn't need to wait. I got some green rubbish bags, you know those big ones. Filled them with our clothes and the kids' precious things. Kylie's monkey went in first, and Tracey's bunny rug that she wouldn't sleep without.'

'Oscar did find out where we were, but all those women. They wouldn't let him in. They stood beside me while I told him I wasn't coming back. He yelled and swore and said he'd get the kids. I was shaking.' Claire stopped to light a cigarette.

'We had to hide for years. You couldn't stay long at the refuge. There were always more women and kids coming. You had to move on. But they helped you. I was always scared he'd find us again. Even looked under the beds every night. Like a kid might.' She grinned. 'He never did.' She took a deep breath. 'I hope the old bastard's drunk himself to death.'There was a pause. 'I work at the refuge one day a week, as a volunteer. Fridays now, because we don't have any classes.'

Max thought a lot about what Claire told him. Wife bashing. Domestic violence, it was called today. He'd heard about it of course, but you didn't imagine it happening to someone like Claire. She seemed as though she'd be able to take care of herself. He said something like that when he saw her again at the start of the new year. 'Can't imagine anyone having a go at you,' he said, smiling. 'Who'd be game to?'

'You wouldn't understand! I changed after I got away from that bastard. When someone keeps treating you as though you're dirt you start to believe it.' Her face was reddening.

Max thought about being in prison, being treated like dirt. He did understand. A bit anyway. And he had come to realise that there were lots of people with problems in his classroom. He couldn't think of anyone in the class who had had what you could call an easy life. All sorts of stories: drug addiction, abusive parents, accidents, illness, sudden deaths, single parents struggling with poverty. The stories came out slowly, bit by bit. He wouldn't really be surprised if someone else had been in prison too. But they were all there, carrying on.

♦ ❖ ♦

They had a different teacher for English the second year. Max's heart sank. She was really keen on students writing. 'If you want to be a good runner, you have to run a lot. If you want to write better, you have to write, every day,' she said. She read aloud two stories, one about a boy whose father was a bully, and another about a funny family Christmas. 'Tell me everything you can think of about childhood,' she said. The whiteboard was soon covered with words: *birthdays, lollies, jelly, dogs, toys, bedtime, hiding, bikes, games, friends, teachers*. Then they talked about being a child. Only a few students said their childhoods were happy. Max said his had been happy.

'Choose a childhood memory,' the teacher said, near the end of the lesson. 'First jot down everything you can think of connected to it. Just like we did on the whiteboard.'

Max was about to say he couldn't think of anything, when the Boxing Day BBQ popped into his head. He jotted words on the paper: *Butch the dog, Auntie Beryl ordering all the women around in the kitchen, beer in the old bath, Uncle John, cricket*.

'Now write about that memory at home, using all your ideas,' said the teacher.

At home that night after tea, Max kept screwing up his sheets

of paper and throwing them in the bin. It was after midnight when he had finally written a page and a half. The most he had ever written.

Max wouldn't read his piece to the class but he said the teacher could. She said she had enjoyed it very much. Everyone laughed about the dog, Butch, pinching the sticks for the fire and Uncle John, who had fallen asleep with all the beer and sun, being squirted with the hose because it was his turn to bat.

'Can we print it in the magazine at the end of the year?' the teacher asked.

'Gees, no,' Max said. Claire smiled at him.

While the class was having a BBQ before the Easter break, Claire finally told Max where she lived, and asked him to her flat for Sunday lunch.

'I'd like that,' he said.

♦ ❖ ♦

There were doilies everywhere like his Mum used to have, and photos of Claire's girls and Kylie's little boy, and the new baby, and all Claire's brothers and sisters. There were so many bits and pieces he felt at first as if he had to keep his arms close to his sides for fear of knocking some vase or ornament off its shelf. Claire collected Buddhas. There were smiling ones, serious ones, thin ones, fat ones, standing ones, sitting ones.

'What for?' he asked.

'I just like them.' Max remembered that his mother used to collect those snowstorms. You shook them and snow fell over the scene under the glass dome.

Max left after they finished their coffee. He didn't want to outstay his welcome. 'Perhaps we can have a counter tea next week,' he said. 'On Monday, when we have that late class.'

'I'd like that,' said Claire.

One day in class the discussion turned to the Vietnam War. Most of the young ones knew nothing about it. They hadn't been born when Max was in the jungle. Max volunteered to explain about the war to the class. He talked for nearly five minutes. Everyone listened very carefully. There was something about his voice while he was talking, something compelling.

'You were there, weren't you?' Claire said afterwards when they were eating lunch. 'You were called up.'

Max nodded. 'I don't talk about it.'

'It was a stupid war,' Claire said. 'We shouldn't have been there. I don't know whether I want to hear it.' And she sniffed, just like his mother did when she had disapproved of something. 'I marched in one of the moratoriums, took the kids. The old man was furious when he found out. My sister took us.'

'Those protesters made us feel really great.'

Claire stared at him. 'Yes, I suppose so. It wasn't really your fault you were there.' They were silent for a while. 'What happened when you left the army?' Claire said suddenly.

'I went to gaol.' Claire's mouth opened, but not a word came out. Then he told her about the shooting and Pentridge, and she squeezed his hand.

'You've had quite a life, haven't you!' she said.

'I've enjoyed it.'

♦ ❖ ♦

One of the young girls asked them to the pub one Friday night, late in the year, to celebrate her birthday. She asked everyone in the class.

The pub was very noisy. There was a band. Jenny had told them it was her favourite group. Max couldn't understand a word they sang, if you could call it singing, he thought. 'You'd go deaf if you spent too much time here,' Max shouted at Claire.

'I can't hear you,' she shouted back.

It was a hot night. They kept drinking and filling up their glasses. At least I can keep up with the young buggers with the drink Max thought, even if my ears give up.

About midnight, Max and Claire decided to leave the young ones to it. Outside in the fresh air, Claire staggered. 'You can't drive home, you've had too much,' Max said. 'Come on, I'll travel on the tram with you, see you home, and then I'll walk back to my place.'

♦ ❖ ♦

In the morning he was still at Claire's, tucked up beside her. 'Gees,' he said. 'We were both drunk.'

Claire looked at him. 'I'm not sorry, are you?'

And Max grinned. 'No way.'

At Christmas, Donny was to retire from his job, and he and Gwen were going to move back to the country. 'I'll really have to find a place of my own now,' Max said.

'You could stay with me for a bit,' Claire said. 'While you're looking.'

'Do you mean it?'

'Yes.' Claire smiled. 'It would be good to have a man around the house.' She paused. 'We'll see how it goes. You never know, it might work out really well.'

'All right,' said Max. 'I'm game if you are.'

Kerry wrote to Max that she was really pleased about Max staying with Claire. You might decide to get married, she wrote. I'd love to be a bridesmaid!

'Struth, Max thought, she's jumping the gun. But he smiled.

GLOSSARY

agent orange - a toxic chemical used to kill vegetation

all eyes - fascinated by something

apples, she'll be apples - it will be all right

backs, on their backs - nagging, always reminding

battalion - 800 soldiers, 8 companies

blind eye - pretend not to notice

bloke - Australian slang for man

bludger - lazy, not doing one's share

Bluey - old fashioned Australian slang name for a red-haired person

bit of a tickle - slight manipulation

bodybag - olive green plastic bag for transporting bodies

bombshell - something quite unexpected

boot up his backside - kick

bucketing down - heavy rain

bunker - a shelter, often underground

burgoo - prison slang for porridge

chook pen - prison slang for exercise yard

codger - old person

commie - communist

company - 100 soldiers, 4 platoons

crappy - not good

crook - Australian slang for unwell, ill, not good

cuckoo - mad, crazy

Dear John letter - letter ending a relationship

dixie - large pot for cooking

dose - venereal disease

dross - waste matter

euphemism - using a soft expression for a harsh reality

FJ - early model Holden car

flown the nest - grown up

footie - football

franger - condom

greens - Army working clothes

grog - alcoholic drink

hack it - persevere, keep at it

jumping the gun - acting too soon

LBJ - Johnson, American President at time of Vietnamese war. Australia's PM, Harold Holt said,'All the way with LBJ.'

lep - left

little green men - not sane

Long Tan - a battle where Australian soldiers were taken by surprise

nasho - national serviceman

nicked - arrested

no way - no

malingering - pretending

moleskins - trousers made of stout material

Nam - Vietnam

OHMS - On Her Majesty's Service

playing up - not being faithful

pissing down - heavy rain

Pucka - Puckapunyal, army base in Victoria

punch-up - fight

put his back into it - worked as hard as he/she could

Quartermaster - officer responsible for stores

machete - large heavy knife

muster - roll call

nog - derogatory term for enemy soldier, used for any Vietnamese

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NVA - North Vietnamese army

perforated - with holes

platoon - smallest army unit, 25 men

Rambo - aggressive male

R & R - Rest and recreation leave granted to soldiers

ripper - good one

rort - a trick, take advantage of

screw - prison officer

smart arse - too clever

snap - I've got the same (based on card game)

sparrow fart - dawn

stint - a turn

tacker, little tacker - small child

tacky - poor quality

TNT - explosive

TPI pension - a pension paid to a returned serviceman who was totally and permanently incapacitated by his war injuries.

upping the stakes - raising the bet for more money

up the spout - pregnant

VC - Viet Cong

Viet Cong - Vietnamese communist; name adopted by South Vietnamese guerrilla forces. Successor to Viet Minh. See next entry.

Viet Minh - nationalist resistance movement established by Ho Chi Minh during the Second World War

whacko - good, or just a meaningless exclamation

whatfor - a good fight, stand up to them

wog - term used for Mediterranean migrants, originally as term of abuse, sometimes used affectionately now

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A SHORT HISTORY OF THE VIETNAM WAR

For fifty years from 1887 Vietnam was part of France's colonial empire in Indo-China (the old name for South-East Asia). During World War II, the country was occupied by the Japanese army. At the same time Ho Chi Minh and his communist dominated guerilla group, the Viet Minh, were working to establish an independent Vietnam.

At a peace conference in 1945, before the final defeat of Japan, it was decided to split Vietnam into two. The Nationalist Chinese army, led by Chiang Kai-shek, was to supervise the disarmament of the Japanese army in the north, and the British army was to take care of the south. The European expectation was for a return to the old pre-war French colonial Indo China.

Seven and a half years of fighting between the French and the Vietnamese resistance movement followed.

In the north, the Viet Minh gradually established control over significant areas of what was to become North Vietnam. As early as September 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared independence for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam with Hanoi as its capital. But the French were trying to maintain the old colonial order. In China, the civil war between Mao Tse Tung's communist army and Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist army ended with a communist victory in October 1949. This meant the Viet Minh then had a

large, friendly Communist nation to assist them.

At a peace conference held in Geneva, it was decided that the French must leave Vietnam and that the country should remain divided with North Vietnam having a communist government and South Vietnam, a non-communist one. Ngo Dinh Diem became the leader of South Vietnam and although at first he was popular, it soon became obvious that he was corrupt. (Diem was later assassinated.)

Soon after Diem became leader of South Vietnam, the USA sent military advisers to South Vietnam to train the army. At much the same time, Ho Chi Minh, now president of North Vietnam, promised to free the South Vietnamese people from their corrupt government. North Vietnamese forces and their South Vietnamese supporters fought against the South Vietnamese army and later against American and Australian troops.

Australia followed the USA in supporting the South Vietnamese government and in 1962 sent military advisers to South Vietnam. Three years later,Australian troops were also sent to fight in Vietnam.

The Australian government supported the South Vietnamese government, because they argued that if South Vietnam became communist then other countries would follow and that this could threaten Australia. Troops believed they were going to Vietnam to preserve freedom in South Vietnam and to stop the spread of communism.

Initially most people in the USA and Australia supported the war in Vietnam. But as the war went on and more American and Australian soldiers were killed and the North Vietnamese were no closer to defeat, support for the war decreased. Demonstrations against the war were held throughout Australia and troops returning from Vietnam wondered what the purpose

of their going and fighting was. Demonstrations in Australia were also against conscription and sending conscripts[1] to the Vietnam war.

By 1970 Australia withdrew some troops from Vietnam. The last troops were withdrawn in 1972 when the Labour Party was elected to government in Australia. The new government also ended conscription.

In 1973 the USA also withdrew all their troops from Vietnam. However, fighting in Vietnam between the North and South continued until 1975 when the North Vietnamese captured Saigon, the southern capital, and Vietnam became an independent and united country for the first time in nearly 90 years.

Between 1962 and 1972 almost 50,000 Australian troops were sent to the Vietnam War. 501 died there and 2,400 were physically injured. Many others came back psychologically injured. These were young men who were disturbed by what they had seen and done and were not really sure why they had been sent to Vietnam. Many still suffer from the physical and psychological injuries they sustained in Vietnam.

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1. Conscripts were 20 year old men selected (conscripted) to serve time in the army on the basis of birthdate. Dates were picked out of a barrel and those whose birthdates were chosen were selected to serve time in the army. This program was called National Service.

TIMELINE

1887 - 1939	Vietnam part of French colonial Indo-China.
1939 - 1945	World War II, and Japanese occupation.
1946 - 54	Long period of fighting to drive the French out of Vietnam.
1950	Ho Chi Minh declares that his government is the only legal government in Vietnam North Vietnam begins war with French to make Vietnam independent and united. USA provides military and economic aid to French in Vietnam.
1954	French are defeated.
1955	USA begins to give aid to the South Vietnamese government and to train the South Vietnamese army.
1960	North Vietnam establishes the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam which the South Vietnamese call the 'Viet Cong' meaning communist Vietnamese.

1962	Australia sends 30 military instructors and 29 Army advisers to South Vietnam to assist South Vietnamese army.
1963	An adviser, William Hacking, becomes the first Australian to die in Vietnam.
	USA continues to support South Vietnam and by the end of the year 15,000 USA military advisers are in Vietnam and the South Vietnamese government receives $500 million in aid from the USA.
1964	Australian army advisers to Vietnam increased and committed to active service (fighting).
	The Australian government announces the introduction of National Service to begin in July 1965. This means that 20 year old men are to be selected for National Service in a lottery on the basis of the date of their birthday. Those selected (conscripted) will serve 2 years full-time in the army and may be sent anywhere, including Vietnam. There is 18 months jail for those who don't register for National Service.
1965	Australian government announces its decision to send troops to Vietnam. The first troops leave later in the year.
	A demonstration in Sydney against the war.
1966	The Australian Prime Minister, Harold Holt, announces that more troops will be sent to Vietnam and this will include conscripts (National Servicemen).

	Australian soldiers, including conscripts, die in Vietnam.
	Demonstrations against conscription.
1967	8,300 Australian troops in Vietnam.
1968	536,000 US troops in Vietnam and 14,592 US troops were killed this year.
1969	Large anti-war demonstrations in Australia and USA. The largest demonstration in Australia was held in Melbourne where 70,000 people marched through the streets.
1970	Large demonstrations against the war and conscription continue in Australia and USA.
	Australia withdraws a battalion from Vietnam.
1971	Large demonstrations continue in Australia and USA.
	Australia withdraws more troops from Vietnam.
1972	Australian Labour Party elected to government.
	New government ends National Service.
	Last troops withdrawn from Vietnam.
1973	USA announces that 'peace with honour' has been agreed to in Vietnam.
	USA troops withdrawn from Vietnam.
1974	Fighting resumes between South and North Vietnam.
1975	Communist forces capture Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam.
	Vietnam becomes one country again.

MAKE A MAN OF HIM

BY PAM BAKER.

Max was one of the St Kilda lads, often in minor scrapes, but nothing very serious. When he was twenty he was conscripted into the army and sent to fight in Vietnam, leaving behind his new wife and baby son. Like most of the nearly 50,000, mostly working class Australians in the war, he knew little about the history or politics of Vietnam. His father, who had fought in World War 2, thought it would "make a man of him."

He returned from his tour of duty physically unharmed, but in the words of his aunt "a bundle of nerves." When he discovered his wife was having an affair with his old mate he took action that had serious consequences. There was a long road to follow before his life returned to the ordinary world he had known as a boy.

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